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UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 MINSK 000459

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SUBJECT: 4,000 PARTICIPATE IN CHERNOBYL MARCH, OPPOSITION  
LEADERS ARRESTED

REF: MINSK 442

**¶1.** (U) Summary: Approximately 4,000 people participated in the opposition's annual Chernobyl march that took place at the National Academy of Sciences in Minsk. Before the demonstration began, however, authorities arrested several opposition activists, including United Civic Party leader Anatoly Lebedko, preventing them from attending the event. Although authorities sanctioned the rally, police afterwards arrested Ten Plus Coalition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich, leader of the Belarusian Popular Front Vintsuk Vyachorka, trade union leader Aleksandr Bukhvostov, and leader of the Belarusian Communist Party Sergey Kalyakin for organizing a separate unsanctioned demonstration. Milinkevich, Vyachorka, and Bukhvostov were sentenced to 15 days and Kalyakin was sentenced to 14 days in jail. End Summary.

Activists Prevented From Participating

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**¶2.** (U) The Belarusian authorities arrested several opposition activists before the Chernobyl march presumably in order to prevent their participation. Youth activists Yevgeny Afnagel and Aleksei Shidlovsky were arrested on April 26 and held for 10 hours. In Mogilev, members of the Radio Electronic Trade Union (REP) were detained on the same day before they and an organized group were to leave for Minsk. In Bobruisk on April 25, police arrested three activists for alleged use of obscenities and insubordination to police officers. Jailed opposition leaders Nikolai Statkevich and Pavel Severinets, who are serving two-year restricted freedom sentences, were ordered on April 25 not to leave their house for the next several days. Opposition leader Andrei Klimov, who is also serving a restricted freedom sentence in Gomel, was banned from leaving his barracks on April 25 and April 26.

**¶3.** (U) The GOB authorities also made sure undesirable foreigners did not participate in the demonstration. On April 26, the Belarusian Embassy denied visas to Lithuanian MPs who planned to participate in the rally. According to Delphi informational agency, the MPs applied for the visas two weeks in advance. On the same day, border guards near Gomel denied entry to two activists of the Union of Ukrainian Youth. The two activists were on a bus from Chernihiv to Gomel and, after explaining the purpose of their visit, were turned away on the grounds that they did not have enough money to stay in Belarus.

Lebedko Arrested And Threatened

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**¶4.** (U) Leader of the United Civic Party Anatoloy Lebedko

disappeared on April 26 at 14:00. For ten hours his relatives and colleagues could not locate him. Only after his release at 24:00 did colleagues learn what happened. According to Lebedko, plainclothesmen pulled him from his car after he left the house on April 26. He was beaten, handcuffed, and stuffed in a vehicle with a jacket covering his face. Lebedko assumed he was taken to BKGB headquarters, where he was left handcuffed and blindfolded. Two unidentified investigators interrogated him for five hours. They called him a traitor and threatened him with terrorism charges. They asked about his foreign travel, particularly to Georgia, Lithuania, and Ukraine, and about his relationship with the chair of the Georgian Defense and Security Committee of the Georgian Parliament Givis Targamadze. After his interrogation, Lebedko was taken to a field and dropped off. As the masked security officers left, they told Lebedko he was a smart man and "should come to the proper conclusion after this situation."

Milinkevich Warned

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¶ 5. (U) At 13:00 on April 26, police approached Milinkevich at his office and summoned him to the Prosecutor's Office. In a 40-minute conversation filmed by security officers, the deputy prosecutor warned Milinkevich that gathering on October Square would be considered an unauthorized demonstration and would result in legal penalties. Milinkevich said it was his moral duty to go to October Square to meet with demonstrators regardless of the punishment, but promised the deputy prosecutor that he would avoid violence.

No Access To October Square

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¶ 6. (U) The plan sanctioned by the authorities called for a meeting at the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) followed by a march to Bangalore Square (reftel). However, as the rally's organizers predicted, approximately 150 demonstrators tried to gather on October Square at 18:00, but could not move past the police lines and barricades that had been in place since 17:00. Ten Plus Coalition presidential candidate Aleksandr Milinkevich and leader of the Belarusian Popular Front (BPF) Vintsuk Vyachorka led the demonstrators away from October Square to the NAS. As they walked, the crowd grew to approximately 600 people. The police periodically warned participants that they were holding an illegal demonstration and would be punished accordingly. Five-ton armored transport vehicles, filled with security forces, trailed the march.

Crowd Grows at NAS

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¶ 7. (U) Meanwhile at NAS, 300 people had gathered at the steps at 18:00. Police surrounded the area and walked through the crowd filming participants. Plainclothesman presence was minimal compared to past demonstrations and poloffs did not see OMON riot police buses or troops surrounding the NAS. (Note: Behind the October theater, located across the street from NAS, were five small buses filled with regular police and riot gear.) At 18:30, the crowd grew to over 1,000 people. Red and white national flags and banners appeared and the rally organizers were setting up a loudspeaker system. Demonstrators also raised flags depicting Minsk's city emblem, Ukraine's national flag, and the Ukrainian NGO Pora's flag and unfurled banners reading "Free Kozulin," "No To A Police State," "Belarus Has Two Disasters: Chernobyl and Lukashenko," and "Stop Dictatorship." People chanted "Long Live Belarus" and "For Freedom."

Opposition Leaders Speak

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**¶8. (U)** After demonstrators from October Square arrived at NAS, the crowd numbered between three and four thousand people. Prominent activists, including Chernobyl activist and NAS member Ivan Nikitchenko, leader of the Belarusian Party of Communists Sergey Kalyakin, BPF leader Vyachorka, deputy chair of the United Civic Party Ludmila Gryaznova, deputy chair of the Belarusian Social Democratic Party "Hramada" Anatoly Levkovich, trade union leader Aleksandr Bukhvostov, and leader of Malady Front Dmitry Dashkevich addressed the crowd. Milinkevich's campaign slogan "Freedom, Truth, Justice" became the demonstration's theme. Milinkevich, the final speaker, predicted Lukashenko's regime would collapse in two years and told the audience it was their duty to "wake people up" and convey the truth.

#### The March to Bangalore

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**¶9. (U)** At approximately 20:00, Milinkevich led the demonstrators along Surganova Street to Bangalore Square. During the hour-long walk, police on loudspeakers warned demonstrators to use the sidewalk, cross the street only on green lights, and stay within the confines of the cross-walks. By 21:00, the 4,000 demonstrators reached the Chernobyl church on Bangalore Square. The crowd dispersed shortly after 22:00.

#### Vyachorka, Kalyakin, Bukhvostov, and Milinkevich Arrested

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**¶10. (U)** Human rights lawyer Vladimir Labkovich told Poloff on April 27 that 13-15 people were arrested after the demonstration dispersed. At around 22:00, security services arrested BPF leader Vyachorka on a side street near Bangalore Square and on April 27, a court sentenced Vyachorka to 15 days in jail for organizing an unsanctioned demonstration. That same day OMON riot police arrested Milinkevich, Kalyakin, and Bukhvostov for the same charges. Milinkevich and Bukhvostov were sentenced to 15 days in jail and Kalyakin was sentenced to 14 days in jail.

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